

President Discusses No Child Left Behind Act

Remarks by the President in Conversation on the Second Anniversary of the No Child Left Behind Act

West View Elementary
Knoxville, Tennessee

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THE PRESIDENT: Thanks for coming. Melvenia, thanks. We are here because West View Elementary School is an example of what can happen when you have leadership that is willing to set high standards and to hold people to account and to realize every child can learn.

One of the things that I've learned as a Governor, now as the President, that successful schools not only require a teaching corps that cares a lot, and parents involved in the school, but it requires a principal who is willing to challenge mediocrity. And so, Melvenia, you're right. We're here because you've been successful. And the results show it. This school had been measured during the measurement process. The early measurement process had been a school that wasn't performing the way that you wanted it, or any citizen of Knoxville, Tennessee would want. In other words, it was below standards.

And now it's exemplary in math, above standards in reading. You're accomplishing that which we all want, and that is not one single child be left behind in the state of Tennessee and the city of Knoxville. You're doing a great job. Thank you for your hospitality. (Applause.)

I mentioned the No Child Left Behind Act. We're here to discuss that piece of bipartisan legislation. It is legislation which I would call historic, because for the first time, the federal government is spending more money, and now asking for results. See, in the past it used to be we would send a check and hope something happened.

And now the federal government is sending checks, at record amounts, I might add, for Title I students and teacher training and reading programs. But we're now saying, listen, we trust you. We trust the Melvenias of the world and the teachers to accomplish a mission; why don't you just show us that you are.

And so we've worked with states and local governments to develop an accountability system all around the country, accountability systems which says that, first of all, we believe in the worth and the intelligence of every child, an accountability system that says, let us know whether or not every child is learning, an accountability system that tests curriculum to determine whether they're working, accountability systems that enable us to address problems early before they're too late.

The No Child Left Behind Act is a great piece of legislation which is making a difference around our country. We've got some people here from around America that are going to discuss what they're doing to accomplish the national objective in a positive way. The national objective is to challenge the soft bigotry of low expectations and to raise the standards for every single child.

You don't know unless you measure. Listen, I've heard every excuse in the book about measurement: you're testing too much, you're teaching the tests, don't test. If you don't test, you have a system that just shuffles the kids through. And that's unacceptable. It's unacceptable to quit on a kid early, and just say, move through and hope you learn. What you've got to do is measure to determine where they are, and then you can compare districts and compare states.

And as a result of strong accountability measures and good teachers and more funding, the results are positive, the fourth grade math test scores around the nation are up nine points since 2000. In other words, we're beginning to achieve -- meet national objectives, which is a more literate group of students. The reading -- the eighth grade math scores are up five points. Fourth graders are now testing above -- reading tests are increasing for fourth graders. We're making a difference.

I say, we. It's not the federal government that's making the difference. The federal government is a funding mechanism for Title I students, for some teacher training programs. The truth of the matter is, the responsibility for educational excellence resides at the local level. Teachers must be free to teach, principals must be free to lead, superintendents of schools must be comfortable with making changes where change is needed. The best education policy is local control of schools. And that's exactly what's another part of the No Child Left Behind Act that's important for you all to understand.

We've got some people here in the audience I want to introduce, before I get to our panel, that know something about education. They're on the front lines of education reform. But before I do so, speaking about a guy who is on the front line of education reform, the United States Senator from the great state of Tennessee, Lamar Alexander, is with us. He was a former governor, was willing to challenge the soft bigotry of low expectations before it was cool to challenge the soft bigotry of low expectations. He did an excellent job as the Secretary of Education under old Number 41 -- (laughter) -- and is now a fine United States Senator. Senator, I'm honored you're with us today. (Applause.)

Jimmy Duncan and Zach Wamp and Bill Jenkins and Marsha Blackburn are all members of the United States Congress. Of course this is Jimmy's district, as he was quick to point out at the airport. (Laughter.) And he invited the three other congresspeople with us today. But these are fine members of the Congress. These are people that believe in the value and worth of every single child. They understand that public education is a top domestic priority of this administration. I thank them for being here and I appreciate your good work on this issue. Thanks for coming. (Applause.)

Charles Lindsey is with us. He's the Superintendent of the Knox County schools. Charles, I'm honored you're here. I appreciate you coming. (Applause.) Bill Haslam is the mayor, newly elected mayor. Where are you, Bill? Thanks for coming. I'm glad you're here. (Applause.) My only advice is to fill the potholes and collect the garbage. (Laughter.) Mike Ragsdale, who is the Mayor of Knox County, is with us. Thank you for coming, Mr. Mayor. I appreciate you being here.

I met a fellow at the airport named Nat Foster. You probably haven't heard of Nat. Where are you, Nat? Oh, there you are. Thanks for coming. Nat is a -- I told him at the airport, I said, you're a drill sergeant in the army of compassion. You see, Nat is a -- one of millions of our fellow citizens who has heard the call to love a neighbor just like you'd like to be loved yourself, and is a mentor. He understands what I know, that the strength of the country is the heart and soul of our fellow citizens. The fact that people are willing to take time out of their busy life and to tutor a child, to serve as a role model for a child, and to teach a child how to read is a defining part of the American civic scene.

And I appreciate Nat Foster being here. I appreciate his willingness to serve as an example for others. January happens to be National Mentoring Month. I hope others in the Knoxville area and all around Tennessee -- and the country, for that matter -- follow the lead of a soldier in the army of compassion like Nat, and serve your country, and your state, and your community by finding a child who needs adult guidance, and mentor, to serve as an example. We can change America one heart and one soul and one conscience at a time. (Applause.)

I'm joined today by the Secretary of Education. He was the Superintendent of Schools in Houston, Texas when I was the Governor. I saw firsthand his deep desire to defeat mediocrity, to insist upon excellence for every single child regardless of their background. He had a deep understanding that every child can learn, and the system must understand that.

I'm comfortable in asking the Congress for more money in the '05 budget, which I will do. We've increased the Title I disadvantaged students spending by 52 percent since fiscal year '01. The teachers and principal program is up by 39 percent. The reading programs are up by over 400 percent. The reason I'm comfortable is because I know that at the helm of the Department of Education, we have a man who knows that putting money into a bad system is not money well spent. Putting money into a system that believes in the worth of every child and is focused on results is money well spent. And that man is Rod Paige. Rod, thank you for joining us. I'd be glad to have some comments. (Applause.)

You've got something to say?

SECRETARY PAIGE: Well, Mr. President, I do.

THE PRESIDENT: Because you better. (Laughter.)

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THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, Rod. You see, what he's saying is: if you believe certain kids can't learn, guess what, they're not going to. If you believe certain children, based upon the color of their skin, can't learn, they won't. And the system will reflect that. Basically, at some school districts, I hate to say, the tendency is to say, let's just move them through. They can't learn, therefore, why measure, why determine, why don't we just get them out of the way? That's unacceptable to America. It's unacceptable to our Secretary of Education. I appreciate the attitude of busting the status quo when the status quo is not meeting the great dreams of our country.

Public education, we've got to get it right. It's the gateway to hope. It is essential for this country to have a public education system that responds to the needs of every child so that we can meet great objectives for this country. It's trite, it's been said a lot, but it's true: The future of the country depends on our capacity to educate every child.

A person who understands that is Dr. Jim Pughsley from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public School system. He's the Superintendent of Schools. And he and Rod have been Superintendents before. But the reason why he has been invited is because he brings an extraordinary record as the Superintendent of Schools. Seven years ago, African-American fifth graders, reading at grade level in the state of North Carolina, were at 35 percent in his district. Today, they're at 78 percent. (Applause.) All fifth graders seven years ago were at 59 percent. And now, they're at 86 percent.

So not only has it been improvement for all students, the minority knowledge gap has closed dramatically. I'll let Jim tell you why, but as a result of these great results and his leadership and the leadership, obviously -- I'm sure he'll tell you -- of principals and teachers who get it, who understand that every child matters, he was named the 2003 Superintendent of the Year by the National Alliance of Black School Educators.

Welcome. I'm glad you're here, Jim. Thanks for coming. (Applause.)

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THE PRESIDENT: I'll drop a fancy word on you, called, disaggregate. He said, we're disaggregating results. We're focusing not just on the whole, we're trying to understand whether or not a black child is learning or a Hispanic child is learning. In other words, we're unwilling to accept the past, where everybody was just kind of measured all together. What we want to know, is we want to know specifically who is succeeding, and who is not. And the No Child Left Behind Act provides additional federal money to stay focused on those children who need help early.

And that's an essential part. You see, these school districts measure. They see a child needs a little extra help in reading or an after-school program. There is money in the budget to focus on that child. And that's an essential change, an essential reform.

Kathy Cox, who is the State School Superintendent from the great state of Georgia has joined us. She was a classroom teacher for 15 years. She is now the Executive Director of the Department of Education. I'm honored you're here. Why don't you share with us your experiences in the great state of Georgia.

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THE PRESIDENT: I want to pick up on two points she made. One is truancy and parental involvement. There's nothing like test results being published to get the attention of a parent. A lot of parents believe in the best, of course, and they believe that the school their child goes to was meeting all kinds of standards and is an excellent school. After all, they've been told that. That may not be the case. And so when you begin to publish the test results, it does enhance parental involvement. It encourages the parent to become involved.

What the No Child Left Behind Act does, it not only provides extra help for a child that needs help early, it also gives parents more options in the process. A parent can take money and send that child to an after-school tutoring program -- by the way, tutoring programs, the sponsor of which can be public-sector or private-sector programs. The child can send the -- the parent can send the child to another public school. In other words, there is a consequence.

Because one of the principles in the No Child Left Behind Act is we're not going to leave children trapped in schools that will not teach or change. There's time for schools to change. There's time for schools to use the accountability system to determine whether or not they're using the right curriculum or not. But there has to be an end to mediocrity at some point in time, and that's what the -- for the parents, as far as the parents are concerned, so the parents have got a lot of different options now available when a school takes Title I money. And that's a very important reform.

But the most important part of the reform is that parents are now becoming more involved in their schools. After all, the child's first teacher is a mom or a dad. And it's essential, as the principal will tell you, that the more civic involvement you get with your schools, the more parental involvement you get with your schools, the more likely it is that school is going to be able to meet the objectives of the No Child Left Behind Act.

Speaking about people who understand the need to use a curriculum that works, Norm Mishelow is with us; he is a principal at the Baron Elementary School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He has come south for some warm weather. (Laughter.) Didn't work. (Laughter.)

MR. MISHELOW: I think it's the same temperature here as there.

THE PRESIDENT: That's right. (Laughter.) One of the things we've done is we've at the federal level put a primary focus on reading. As I mentioned to you, the amount of reading money now available is an increase of 400 percent over the last three years. And what's important about

reading programs is they actually work -- not that they sound good, but they actually achieve the objective. And the way to determine whether or not reading programs work is to measure. If a child can read, it will show up on an accountability system.

And, Norm, why don't you tell us about what we call research-based reading programs, and tell us about your school and what you're doing.

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THE PRESIDENT: A couple of observations. First of all, we're learning what works when it comes to reading. It's not guess work anymore. For a while it was a guess work. You might remember the great debates, capsulized -- whole language versus phonics. There was a lot of political capital expended over that. And all of a sudden the accountability system starts to clarify reality. And as Norm mentioned, they've chosen a program and a curriculum that is now working. Why do we know? Because they measure. They're able to tell because there is a measurement standard. The other thing that happens when Norm's school does well, other schools say, wait a minute, old Norm doesn't seem to be all that good, how is he able to do what he's doing? (Laughter.)

MR. MISHELOW: Who are you talking to?

THE PRESIDENT: Well -- (laughter) -- just guessing, Norm. (Laughter.) But it serves as a go by. See, when you have accountability and you lay the results out for everybody to see, all of a sudden people start saying, what's Norm doing that I'm not doing? Because as Norm mentioned to you, he's taken a school of children who -- as we say -- used to say, tough to educate, and showing what can happen. I appreciate, Norm, your leadership. You said you've got a great staff. You do. It also -- you're an educational entrepreneur, somebody who is willing to focus on what works. And thank you for what you're doing. I appreciate -- I know the people of Milwaukee are thrilled that you are where you are.

With us, as well, is Margie Willis, Grace Christian Elementary, Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Grace Christian is a Title I school, receives Title I money. Title I, by the way, for those who aren't aware of the term, are federal monies aimed at economically disadvantaged kids. It's an important part of the federal funding -- the education funding program. It's a commitment that the federal government has made, will continue to make.

But Margie is a literacy coach. That's an interesting term, isn't it? She is -- has met -- the students have met expectations. Tell us about your school, Margie. Tell us what you're doing, and tell us how you've been so successful.

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THE PRESIDENT: I appreciate you. Thank you so much. (Applause.) By the way, research-based reading means phonics, in essence. And it is -- it works. It works, and we know it works, and you've heard personal testimony that it does work. And I would urge schools that aren't using research-based reading programs to take a look at them. If you're not meeting standards, listen to the personal testimony of people in the front line of public education, and listen to the joy in their voices about achieving fantastic results and watching all the kids from all walks of life, all economic backgrounds succeeding.

I'll never forget, one time we were in Houston and Rod had a -- he didn't call her a reading -- a literacy coach. He called her a reading czar. But anyway -- czarina in this case. And she stood up and said, reading is the new civil right. And we're getting it right in more and more schools. I want to thank both of you all for being on the front edge of change. Thank you for your examples.

Jerry Hodges is with us today. He's the Executive Director of Project GRAD based right here in Knoxville, Tennessee. Project GRAD is a non-profit trying to close the achievement gap by talking about and spreading curriculum that works. Thanks for coming.

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THE PRESIDENT: Well, I appreciate it. Thanks, good job. Thank you. (Applause.)

Non-profits, corporate Tennessee, people who care about the future of your state need to follow the example of Project GRAD and become involved in your school districts. I appreciate the Superintendent and the school board members for reaching out and understanding that educational excellence is a local responsibility. People really shouldn't hope that the federal government develops the blue print for success. That's not our role.

And you don't want a one-size-fits-all education approach. You want a -- the best education reform comes when the local people decide to reform, when your principals reform, when the people running at the state level reform, when businesses and local community leaders say, wait a minute, we're not happy with the way things are, let's change for the good of everybody.

And that's what's taking place here in Knox County schools. I want to thank you for that. Listen, I want to thank you all for coming. I'm honored our panel came from around the country to share with us the stories of success. And by the way, we're just beginning in America. See, one of these days, we won't have enough room on the stages as we bring people from all around the country to talk about what is happening, the tremendous success as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act. I'm honored you all came. I want to thank you again for believing in every child and raising that bar and believing in the worth of every individual.

May God bless your work, and may God continue to bless our country. Thank you for coming. (Applause.)

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